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What Do We Mean By It

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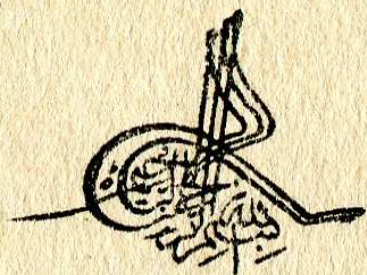
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What do we mean by it?

No body would gainsay that, nowadays, cultural issue is a controversial issue. It is really hard to find a comprehensive definition of culture, much less to say that there really exists such a culture on which humanity can bank for a peaceful and prosperous social life. True, it is the very culture that enables us to live together as a family, tribe or nation. But if we are deprived of such a primary necessity, it would be deplorable, even if we are in a state of confusion and disagreement about our social and cultural ideologies. That is the cause why the world, as a whole, is undergoing turmoils. However, Bertrand Russel has depicted the situation in these words, "The conflict existed in Greece before the rise of what we recognize as philosophy, and is already quite explicit in already Greek thought. In changing forms, it has persisted down to the present day, and no doubt will persist for many ages to come."



"It is clear that each party to this dispute—as to all that persists through long periods of time—is partly right and partly wrong. Social cohesion is a necessity, and mankind has never yet succeeded in enforcing cohesion by merely rational arguments. In general, important civilizations start with a rigid and superstitious system, gradually relaxed, and leading to certain stage, to a period of a brilliant genius, while the good of the old tradition remains, and the evil, inherent in its dissolution, has not yet developed. But as the evil unfolds, it leads to anarchy, then inevitably, to a new tyranny, producing a new synthesis secured by new system of dogma. (*History of Western Philosophy*, page 20).

So, the present confusion and conflict is a natural outcome of the relaxation of the period which Russel terms as a "rigid and superstitious system." Obviously, he thereby means a religious period. It shows that no community or nation subsists, or has ever subsisted, without a religious origin, because it is the religion alone that forms a nucleus of a strong cohesive attraction, around which mankind flocks in such a congenial society as has been very hard for time and corruption to break it. It is about this stage of religious relaxation that Russel says: "A period of brilliant genius" takes its place and the 'evil unfolds, it leads to anarchy, then, inevitably, to a new tyranny." Consequently, he holds that the present civilization of the twentieth century has brought the whole world in the grip of its "new tyranny," and it will bring about, as corollary,



“a new synthesis, secured by new system of dogma.” But to avoid this new synthesis or a revival of a religious era, he says disdainfully: “The doctrine of liberalism is an attempt to escape from this endless oscillation. Whether this attempt can succeed only the future can determine.”

Similarly, Toynbee has referred to this oscillative phenomenon in the “Civilization on Trial” purporting that because our civilization has reached its self-destructive climax, there will inevitably succeed a religious era. Hence, it would be futile to hope that pleadings of a selfish materialistic and dying civilization might help avert the nemesis.

Therefore, for one thing, what we mean by Islamic culture is *the future culture* of the world. We claim it to be so, because of the fact that in the progressive series of cultural oscillations, Islam is the last and perfect religion, revealed for mankind, as God says, “This day, have I perfected your faith for you and completed My favour for you and have chosen for you Islam as the religion.” (5 : 43).

But Islamic culture would not, to be sure, bring about a rigid and superstitious system, as feared by Russel, it being noted that, Islam, and for that matter, the system created by it, can be no other than a most liberal institution man has ever seen. I base this assertion on the Quranic verse itself, which says, “In the matters of faith, there shall be no coercion,”



so that, "Let them perish, who perish by their own reason ; and let them survive who survive by their own reason." (8 : 42). Accordingly, Islam does not inculcate its teachings dogmatically. Instead, it provides "clear proof" and thereby allows free play of reason to a seeker after the truth. We are not in the habit of presenting a culture that may be imposed upon man by "coercive measures" or a code of life that may be incomprehensible to the understanding and intelligence of the present generation. For the same reason, we can say that what we mean by Islamic culture is a social order which can be subject to the scansion of human intelligence.

It should be also borne in mind that what we mean by Islamic culture is not the same thing as is usually meant by some of the scholars concerned. They take culture to mean viscissitudes which various nations and communities go through in the process of relaxation. Such attempts have proved abortive in solving existing cultural conundrum. Nevertheless, what we mean by Islamic culture is its interpretation as it is applicable to the present world conditions, because the teachings, brought by the great Prophet Muhammad, (peace and the blessings of God be upon him), were universal, for God has said : "And We have sent thee not but as a mercy for all people." (21 : 107).

In view of the controversial opinions in defining culture, let us make the most generalised and universally accepted principle as our starting point. This will enable us to make a



comparative study of Islamic culture, in the hope that our endeavour may help eliminate some of the underlying difficulties.

Organically, man falls in the domain of biological enquiry. I bring as witness an excerpt from the article under caption "biology" in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1910), written by T. Huxley and P. C. Mitchell which runs as follows, "The biological sciences are those which deal with the phenomena manifested by living matter; and though it is customary and convenient to group apart such of the phenomena as are termed mental, and such of them as are exhibited by men in society under the head of psychology and sociology yet it must be allowed that no natural boundary separates the subject matter of the latter sciences from that of biology. Psychology and sociology is inseparably linked with physiology; and the phases of social life exhibited by animals other than man, which some time curiously foreshadow human politics fell strictly within the province of the biologist."

This exception makes it all too clear that the social life of man should be viewed as beneficial to mind and body alike, and not as something having a connection with bodily urges only because as we have seen "psychology and sociology are inseparably linked with physiology." In other words, it means that it would prove harmful to human nature if a culture looks after the material aspects only, divorced from mental and spiritual sides. In the same way, if



spiritual code of life, which pays no heed to the corporal exigencies, can also prove injurious to mankind. In this respect also, we can claim on safe grounds that Islam takes full regard of both the "inseparably linked" aspects of human life and society.

A recalcitrant may well contend, however, that because some of the animals, such as ants and bees, instinctively follow such "phases of social life" which "curiously foreshadow human policy," it shows that in due course, man might also attain a better culture on the basis of "survival of the fittest." This plea presupposes that the mighty and his culture should prevail and that the weak, together with his ideology, should vanish. We leave this debatable question whether this principle is applicable in general or not; it is accepted on all hand that a majority from among the animals are weak and yet they flourish. Therefore, the governing principle of their survival should certainly be different from "survival of the fittest." Nor is it a fact that survival of ants and bees depends upon their social and highly co-operative life, when on the contrary, without a social life human existence seems to be difficult. Man is altogether a *sui generis* kind in view of his being "intellectually conscious," so that he is apt to adopt any course of life—disastrous or beneficial—through his free choice. In contradistinction, it has been proved, by observations and experiments, that it is not possible for any other animal to deviate from the ways



of life they follow instinctively. Yes, it is true that animals also possess a degree of consciousness but such consciousness remains confined to instinctive circles only, to help the fulfilment of the urges they are driven at; so that we shall call them "instinctively conscious" beings to show to this radical distinction.

The Holy Quran lays down that man is not bound by an instinctive course as far as his conduct and career are concerned, save that only intellectual and endo-psychic understanding for good and bad, virtue and vice, have been provided in the character of his mind. Thus God says, "There is nothing for man except what he tries for." As regards animals, we are told on the other hand, "They do whatever is ordained for them." Further, as to the diverse behaviours of animals they evince, we are told, that they are symbols for men in order to enable them to choose their course to order their life, humble or brutal, social or unsocial, satanic or virtuous, and so on. It is also said that "There are so many, who are led astray by them, and so many, who follow the right path." Thus not only freedom of conduct and behaviour has been bestowed upon man, they are also given the chance to win God's pleasure and reward.

To remove further any evolutionary misunderstanding regarding the cultural issue, let me quote Sir Eliot Smith, one of the foremost anthropologists of the day. He says, "Although the use of the word evolution in ethnology is not half a century old, the idea to which this



error in terminology was unhappily applied, is much older. It can, in fact, be traced back as early as the eighteenth century and perhaps earlier still. But when it assumed the false label 'evolution,' it acquired the glamour of fashionable phrase and thereby enjoyed an immunity from criticism. The idea of the independent development of culture thus gradually hardened into a rigid dogma.....Hence the process involved in originating and diffusion of knowledge and man's interpretation of it is something different from organic evolution. It is, therefore, dangerous and misleading to use such biological terms as 'evolution' and 'convergence' as so many writers are now doing, in reference to cultural history and to circumstances that are fundamentally distinct from those biological phenomena in reference to which the terms in question were devised." (*Evolution in the Light of Modern Knowledge*, pages 299 and 315).

Unless one blindly follows "scientific orthodoxy" one would have to face the fact that new cultures develop independently as a revolution, not evolution, to save from utter destruction and to open up new and peaceful avenues for further progress.

The existing dominant culture, namely the the materialistic civilization of the twentieth century, along with its allied cultures which try to follow its footsteps, are chiefly concerned with the temporal and secular side of human affairs. The spiritual or, so to say, psychological aspect of the human life especially as regards



its purpose the fact has either been totally cast aside or deliberately put in the melting pot. The result is that the material side of human life, with all its good and bad effects, has progressed so far off, that the either side of the picture seems to be of little importance at all. In sharp contrast there are cultures, that pay no heed to bodily and social requirements, contemplating exclusive stress on spiritual aspects of life only. In the Islamic perspective, neither of them can be counted as true cultures, for we are urged to pray: "O our Lord grant us well-being of this world, and the well-being of the world to come, and thus save us from the fire of punishment."

It would, therefore, be an utter falsehood to allege that Islamic culture, as a religious code, does not recommend a full scale material progress, hand in hand, with spiritual and virtuous life, as it has been explicitly stated, "It is exclusively for your benefit whatever there exists in the world," and not only this much, but we are also taught how to derive benefit from the material world: "By putting your thought in the making of the earth and skies," that is, by scientific thought. That is why, at the advent of Islam, old treasures of philosophy and science, buried for centuries past, were unearthed and in a comparatively short time, a great deal of advance was made upon them. Since, however, acquisition of scientific knowledge was enjoined as a religious duty. But it slackened with the gradual decline of faith. It follows, therefore, that there is no other way for



strengthening a Muslim society materially than through a revival of Islam itself.

European countries took to scientific pursuits in the teeth of strong opposition from Papacy and the dread of the Inquisitors of Faith, because they found that it was hard to compete out an Islamic polity, the fields of trade and knowledge. As a result of opposition of the ecclesiastical prince the gulf between religion and science deepened in proportion to the progress in the latter field. In practical terms, all European nations are materialistic. Nevertheless, this great experiment affords to learn how far such a culture could prove a success so far as it is concerned with human well-being. In this regard I would like to bring Sigmond Freud as witness, being himself an ardent supporter of the present culture, and psycho-analytically a keen observer too. The quotations which follow are from his treatise, "Future of an Illusion," exclusively, especially from the places where he has dealt with the present culture and its effects upon human nature. At the very outset Freud has realised, "One thought at first that the essence of culture lay in the conquest of nature for the means of supporting life, and in eliminating the dangers that threaten culture by the suitable distribution of these among mankind, but now the emphasis seems to have shifted away from the material plane to the psychic. The critical question is whether and to what



extent one could succeed, first, in diminishing the burden of the instinctual sacrifices imposed on men ; secondly, in reconciling them to those that must necessarily remain ; and thirdly, in compensating them for these." He also said : "Thus in addition to the resources, there are the means of defending culture : the coersive measures, and others that are intended to reconcile men to it and to recompense them for their sacrifices. And these last may be described as the psychical sphere of culture." It is true that without some sacrifices no social life is possible ; but without a social life there cannot be progress and well-being. So, the question is, can an intellectual being regard it as good living to suffer life-long checks upon his liberty, imposed by social prohibitions, such as, paying ever increasing taxes from his own earnings and property, sacrificing his time or even his life to serve other members of the society without any hope of reward or "recompense" in this life ? That is why it is necessary to resort to "coersive measures" to preserve such a culture, they cannot do it without C. I. D., police, and sometimes without military force, supplemented by courts, jails and concentration camps to suppress human nature. These measures ultimately lead to frustrations and privations, causing discomfort antagonism and mental ills. The latest reports of general check up show a heavy percentage amongst the intellectuals and the mediocres of the

... are suffering from many types



of neurosis. At the same time there seems no other way to remove these ills, save as Freud has suggested, by entering in the "psychical sphere" of culture. He has expressed the hope that duration and habit may eliminate such ill feelings against the "culture" or that exclusive education may train human mind to get reconciled with cultural prohibitions and "instinctual renunciations." Psycho-analytically, however, he is not hopeful, because, "That is surely an illusion; in this decisive point human nature is hardly likely to alter," for the simple reason that man, being a rational and intellectual entity, it is difficult for him to endure sufferance for purposes of having a joyful life only. Human nature demands a purpose higher than living an animal life, besides a reward or at least appreciation for his deeds and sacrifices which he does not get in this life. Therefore, as far as human nature is concerned, nothing can serve this purpose except a religion and belief in the life-hereafter. Practically such efforts have totally failed where men were brought to live without a religion, as Freud points out: "Once before, such an attempt to substitute reason for religion was made, officially and in the grand manner. Surely you remember the French Revolution and Robespier, and also how short-lived and how deplorably ineffectual the experiment? It is being repeated in Russia at present, and we need not be curious about the result." The result is to be



the same as it has been in the 'Free Europe' after a long and extravagant experiment, carried out there in the guise of 'modern civilization' of the 'enlightened' era. For still we find that, 'There are innumerable civilized people who would shrink from murder or incest, and who yet do not hesitate to gratify their avarice, their aggressiveness and their sexual lust, and who have no compunction in hurting others by lying, fraud and calumny, so long as they remain unpunished for it ; and no doubt this has been so for many cultural epochs.' "Cultural epochs," referred to by Freud in this context, mean the past civilizations which always grow as excremental developments on ruins of their mother religions. It is true that, such cultures never proved a success. On the contrary, because of the inherent self-destructive factors, they bring about the necessary conditions for ushering in a new era of purely religious import. Freud himself has depicted the present conditions of the world, and said : "We see that an appalling large number of men are discontented with civilization and are" unhappy in it, and feel it is as a yoke that must be shaken off, because, "It has been admitted that so far science has achieved much, but even it has advanced far further, it would not suffice for men."

However, the cardinal question is how these gross deficiencies can be removed, and peace and comfort restored to the suffering humanity under the crushing "yoke" of the present civilization. Freud shrinks back from facing this



pertinent question because he found it insoluble in a material perspective. He finds himself "forced by necessity" to urge, "in all earnestness" "even if one knew, and could prove, that religion was not in possession of truth, one should conceal the fact and behave as the philosophy of 'as if' demands...and this in the interest of preservation of everybody. Also said he: "But such as they are, these ideas, religious in the broadest sense of the word, are prized as the most precious possessions of culture, as the most valuable thing it has to offer its members, far more highly prized than all our devices for winning the treasures of the earth, for providing men with a sustenance, or for preventing their diseases, and so forth; men suppose that life would be intolerable if they did not accord these ideas the value that is claimed for it. "But on the other hand, if experiments have any conclusive value, then this great experiment, carried out at the expense of human sufferings and sacrifices, undeniably bring us face to face the deep reality that reverence and love for the Maker is instinctive in human psychique. Without this man would never find comfort and peace of mind, as his Maker Himself has said: "Only in the remembrance of God men's hearts are comforted." It also proves incontestably that it is dangerous, for, individually or collectively, he may be compelled to endure a purely secular and materialistic culture. That is why, in view of such a culture, Freud admitted his inability for "constructing a Weltanschauung" or "purpose" and thus found



himself forced "in the interest of preserving everybody" to have a recourse to religion, in spite of being fully aware of "the admission that religion no longer has the same influence on men that it used to have, (we are concerned here with European Christian culture). And this, not because its promises have become smaller, but because they appear less credible to people."

In reality the religion, for which humanity is yearning today, is that which should be convincing according to the highest intellectual vision ; and be able to fulfil the needs of the world as a whole. This is not true of the religions which envisage to solve the limited problems of the communities living long ago and were confined in different regions of the world. Past religions, especially with their distorted and adulterated contents, are not expected to solve present problems, or to create a healthy atmosphere that may bring about a change in the existing climate of opinion. Otherwise, Freud would have never said : "We say to ourselves, it would indeed be very nice if there were a God, who was both creator of the world and a benevolent providence, if there were a moral world order and a future life, but at the same time it is very odd that this is all just as we should wish it ourselves. And it would be still odder if our poor, ignorant, enslaved ancestors had succeeded in solving all these difficult riddles of the universe," though indeed, He possesses the same and even more praiseworthy attributes. It is of course a different question that



the old and obsolete religions are not dynamic enough to convince the present mind. We are not dealing here with a culture of our fore-fathers in retrospect. We are presenting a culture which is chronologically the latest, and has been preserved beyond doubt in the self-same form it was revealed. *A fortiori* it is a comprehensive moral order, pertaining to a world society as a unit ; and with a promise to refresh its teachings by reformers to be raised as, and when needed, in consonance with the demands of the fastly progressive world. It is true that until we do not get day to day proof of a Living God, no by-gone scriptures and long forgotten miracles would convince human mind. Therefore, Islamic culture also signifies that it is a Providential code of life, revealed by the Living God with axiomatic proof to bring about complete conviction against modern scepticism.

I don't think that any further proof would be needed to show that a materialistic code of life, that is to say a culture without religion, can bring about human well-being no matter how much earthly wealth, alluring lives, great power and what not in human nature, would continue its quest for a real culture, where spiritual comfort and material progress should be blended together in a wholesome manner. Besides, there are many other points, which have been settled after a long and bitter experimentations in favour of Islamic culture. An instance in point is the pre-Islamic ritual of burning or burying women slaves alive with their dead masters. On the other hand



Islam eradicated slavery, root and branch, and even the prisoners of wars who can be called slave in a way must be set free at the earliest. Women were given first even the right to divorce and inheritance to property to relieve them of a merciless and inhuman subjugation. Though modern civilization has, willy-nilly, abolished slavery, it has kept the feminine sex in the same precarious condition of remaining without the right of divorce and of inheriting property. By disallowing polygamy, which in certain circumstances and with a limitation of number was allowed by Islam, the western culture claims a great achievement. But experience has established that it was a worst type of slavery that women were not being admitted right to separation, and the right to share an inheritable property. Though recently, these rights have been recognized only to establish supremacy of Islamic culture. On the other hand it is also being strongly felt, that such occasions do arise when polygamy become an indispensable necessity. There can arise a political necessity, to create better relations and nearness between countries, nations or tribes. Besides to give protection to widows or women in a country where incidentally they increase in numbers over men, as for the same fact the present condition of Europe itself has become expedient for polygamy; where the increase in number of women is being felt as unhealthy consequences for a normal social life. It would be surprising to note that to remedy this morbid situation first step has been taken by the women themselves. Recently, it was disclosed in the British Parliament,



that young and independent girls join together in twos, threes, or fours and keep jointly a male only to look after them and their household affairs. However, it was questioned whether this practice is not the type of polygamy being in vogue in Burma, initiated by women and rendering the male members of the country addict to narcotics and idleness ?

There are so many other issues, in connection with politics, economics, international affairs, where, after many trials and errors, conclusions are being drawn nearer and nearer to what has been laid in the Holy Quran as the ultimate solution of future problems of the world, for creating peaceful, progressive and comfortable atmosphere. For example, democracy, tolerance, mutual help for economic and educational uplift, elimination of colour and racial prejudices, etc. But these and all other issues to bring about a real and congenial culture for mankind can be realised in full measures and in a most healthy atmosphere if and when Islamic culture is allowed to prevail.

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